

Remarks at New Delhi International Ministerial Conference on Avian and Pandemic Influenza

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Opening remarks
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(As delivered)

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Honorable ministers, distinguished delegates:

First, I would like to join with my colleagues in thanking the Government of India for its efforts in organizing and hosting this conference of ministers and other senior officials from around the world. I, like they, am mindful of the enormous amount of time and labor that goes into preparing these large gatherings, and we are grateful for the results.

Those of us in this hall have been exchanging views and information on avian and pandemic influenza in recent years along lines which can seem discouragingly static. At the meeting of the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza in Washington in October 2005, through subsequent major international conferences in Beijing, Vienna, and Bamako, there have been mutual and very justifiable calls for vigilance and speed in preventing and responding to H5N1 outbreaks in poultry, for transparency in dealing with them when they occur, and for perseverance and determination in preparing for a possibly catastrophic human pandemic when a virus mutates to that point. These are familiar themes, which can induce a feeling of *deja vu* and "business as usual."

I would submit to you, however, that a case can be made that the dogged repetition of these themes has in fact produced solid results, and that we have moved into a new phase in the long campaign to confront highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza in birds, which also has infected more than 300 people in the world, as well as to prepare for the possibility of a human pandemic influenza should this virus mutate. While we have made progress during the years since the virus first appeared, we now need to shift some of our efforts from the "emergency" phase of identifying and dealing with avian outbreaks to a greater emphasis on long-term capacity-building to improve both animal and human health systems as they relate to the H5N1 avian influenza virus and other emerging and reemerging infectious zoonotic diseases.

For positive indicators, we can survey with considerable satisfaction the practical mechanisms that have been established globally to monitor and respond to avian outbreaks of the highly pathogenic virus. We recognize that enormous gaps remain in parts of the world, but in the last few years a vast network of experts has put in place solid procedures for detecting and dealing with the disease in birds. Indeed, today's systems for reporting on and responding to avian influenza in birds - national plans, veterinary surveys, diagnostic laboratories, communication strategies, and much more - were in many cases merely drawing-board plans two or three years ago. We have come far.

Accordingly, while our broad goals at this, the fifth major international conference, remain the same - to elevate avian and pandemic influenza on national agendas, to coordinate efforts among donor and affected nations, to mobilize and leverage resources globally, to increase transparency in disease reporting and surveillance, and to build local capacity - we now need to do more to "fine-tune" and coordinate our work.

As we look ahead, the U.S. government sees five priority areas where systematic effort is called for:

- First, because highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreaks in poultry continue to occur frequently, local and national authorities must have the capability on a timely basis to detect and stamp out new outbreaks. We need to continue coordinating our efforts in countries where highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza is entrenched, enhance bio-security practices in poultry rearing and marketing systems, and define specific strategies;
- Second, we need to work together to ensure the international community is in a position to assist an affected nation to respond rapidly to an incipient human pandemic so that we can contain, or at least slow, the spread of a novel human influenza virus through efforts such as deployment of anti-viral medication and other measures;
- Third, all countries need to be prepared to institute non-pharmaceutical interventions to mitigate the impact of a pandemic on communities before a vaccine is available through various forms of social distancing, such as school closings, isolation, and quarantine;

- Fourth, relief agencies and others need to plan for enormous humanitarian assistance needs that could arise during a pandemic; and
- Finally, we need to work together to ensure that the Global Influenza Surveillance Network works efficiently and transparently for the benefit of global public health, while we continue both to share influenza virus samples and to increase access to vaccines and other measures during a pandemic.

That said, I do wish to draw attention to the fifth point. We are pleased that the World Health Organization's Intergovernmental Meeting on Pandemic Influenza Preparedness agreed on concrete steps to improve the Global Influenza Surveillance Network. At the meeting, which concluded on November 23, WHO Member States asked Director General Chan to move forward on two immediate measures to improve transparency of the network: A "traceability" mechanism to track the H5N1 virus and other potentially pandemic human viruses that are shared with the network; and an advisory group, appointed by the Director General, to monitor and advise on strengthening the network.

The threat of a worldwide human influenza pandemic persists. The world needs to strengthen and enhance the longstanding Global Influenza Surveillance Network as a predictable, reliable, and efficient system for sharing of human influenza virus samples, both seasonal and pandemic, in order to rapidly analyze and monitor the threat, to undertake additional research, and to produce vaccines. The United States and other donors continue to provide benefits, voluntarily, through WHO's Global Action Plan to Increase Pandemic Vaccine Supply, via regular support to National Influenza Centers, and through other means.

At the WHO meeting, countries agreed to share virus samples while discussions continue on a detailed framework for two distinct issues: virus sharing and benefit sharing. We call on all countries to share virus samples freely, without encumbrances, for the benefit of global health.

We in the international community and each individual country can be proud of our achievements to date. We must continue to assess priorities and enhance the necessary resources. On the latter point, the U.S. Government will be announcing later in this conference a substantial increase in the level of our international assistance for avian and pandemic influenza above the amount that we pledged through December 2006 at the Bamako conference (\$434 million).

This body has many important issues to deal with, and we look forward to our discussions here in New Delhi.

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